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SUBJECT: FINLAND: THE FAR LEFT SLOWLY IMPLODES

¶1. (U) Summary: Finland's only far-left party, the Left Alliance (LA), is struggling in the wake of the resignation of its popular chairperson, Suvi-Anne Siimes. An extraordinary congress elected a radical labor leader as the new chairperson, alienating some party leaders and leading to the resignation/defection of the number two and three LA Members of Parliament behind Siimes. Other MPs, activists, and youth leaders have been quietly approaching the Social Democrats and Greens about defecting too. If the LA's new leadership is unable to quickly stem the tide, the Alliance may completely unravel. At the very least, its relevance to Finland's political system is probably already significantly diminished.

¶2. (U) Finland's far left party, the Left Alliance (LA), appears to be in the process of slowly disintegrating. An unstable collection of former communists, labor activists, greener-than-Green environmentalists, and anti-EU populists, the LA has, surprisingly, remained a force in Finnish politics over the past 6 years and is currently the fourth largest party (19 seats out of 200) in Finland's Parliament. Much of the LA's success can be attributed to the personal appeal and popularity of several of its leading members. Former party chair Suvi-Anne Siimes, a charismatic social scientist with close-cropped platinum-blond hair and a media-savvy approach to politics, has fueled the party's popularity for the past few years; however, Siimes stepped down as party chair two months ago amidst internal bickering. Siimes' proactive and centrist views on security policy (including cooperation with NATO) and the EU put her at odds with the LA's parliamentary group that often seems more comfortable with the role of permanent opposition than as serious contenders for junior coalition partnership.

Seems Like Old Times

¶3. (U) Siimes' resignation led to an extraordinary party congress last week and the election as party chair of Martti Korhonen, a mechanic and longtime far-left labor activist. Korhonen was backed by the colorful and foul-mouthed Jaako Laakso, the sole remaining holdover in Finland's Parliament of the old pro-Soviet faction during the Cold War. Korhonen's election signals a definite turn toward the far left for the LA and a rejection of Siimes' more moderate line that was designed to reach beyond the Alliance's shrinking traditional base. But whether Korhonen will have much of a party left following the defection and retirement of several other leading LA politicians is an open question.

Jumping Ship

14. (U) The biggest surprises at the hastily called LA party congress were announcements that several leading LA Members of Parliament were stepping down. Outi Ojala, a well known feminist and arguably the most popular LA politician after Siimes, will not run for re-election next year (March 2007) and plans to retire from politics. Two other MPs, including the party's floor leader, announced that they were leaving the party, possibly for the Social Democrats (SDP). It is quite possible that several additional Alliance MPs will follow suit, defecting to either the Social Democrats or Greens. One senior Green party MP told Poloff that they (Greens) have already received feelers from at least two additional Alliance MP's about jumping ship; moreover, activists from party organizations like the LA Youth League have been in touch with SDP and Green counterparts, indicating that the erosion which began at the top is now eating in to the Alliance's working-level cadres and supporters. Finland's next Parliamentary elections are still 10 months away, but the far left's current disarray suggests the party may face a looming disaster next spring; in fact, if the current erosion continues, the general election could well be the Alliance's last.

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